Hale Woodruff's Murals at Talladega College

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The Search for a Usable Past: American Mural Painting, 1880–1940

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"The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future," wrote historian and bibliophile Arthur Alfonso Schomburg in an essay for the anthology *The New Negro* (1925), a volume that celebrated the cultural production of the Harlem Renaissance. For Schomburg, history was a means of rectifying the demeaning legacy of the slave past and of outlining the cultural achievements of African Americans. He envisioned a well-documented history that would serve as reclamation of blacks' vital participation in world history and provide inspiration for future generations of African Americans. Schomburg called for recording the role that African Americans had played in their own freedom and advancement, the acknowledgment of black achievements, and the recognition of blacks' essential role in the development of human culture. In his essay, "The Negro Digs Up His Past," Schomburg referred to the writing of history for future generations, but his charge to African American scholars and writers in the 1920s was readily applicable to black artists engaged in mural painting in the 1930s. For artists such as Hale Woodruff, mural painting was a means to express the rich and complex history of African Americans (see fig. 3). On the walls of libraries, hospitals, and classrooms, Woodruff joined other African American artists of the 1930s in reclaiming and celebrating black history.

In this essay, I trace the growth of mural painting in the United States, with a focus on the 1930s, in order to place Woodruff's Talladega College murals in a broader historical context. First, I examine three themes that I consider integral to African American artists' approaches to mural painting: the call for the documentation of black history; the search for a "usable past," as articulated by the literary critic Van Wyck Brooks; and the reliance of history painting in public space in the 1930s as a viable means to record the diversity of American history. Second, I consider the rich tradition of American mural painting during the period of the American Renaissance, the rise of American scene painting, the turn to social realism and radical politics, and the government sponsorship of the arts through the administration of

Fig. 1. Hale Woodruff, The Building of the Library, 1940. Collection of Talladega College, Talladega, Alabama.
President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal during the 1930s. Within this framework, I discuss the murals of Edwin Blashfield and Thomas Hart Benton, the inventions of Mexican artists José Cisneros Orozco and Diego Rivera, and the paintings of Aaron Douglas, Charles Alston, and Charles White.

**THE SEARCH FOR BLACK HISTORY AND A USEABLE PAST**

African American artists created their murals within the large constellation of ideas relating to early black scholars' refections of mainstream histories, which excluded blacks, and those writers' debunking of racial essentialist theories which claimed white supremacy. At the end of the Civil War and into the early twentieth century, African American historians explored the American past. They pointed to the inconsistencies of an American history that suggested blacks had no history, and they highlighted the role of African Americans in the development of the United States and their distinctive achievements and contributions to the nation. The best-known of these texts include George Washington Williams's two-volume History of the Negro Race in America, 1819–1888 (1883), William T. Alexander's History of the Colored Race in America (1887); Pauline Hopkins's novel of fictitious retelling to the Early Gutenach of the American Race (1905), Benjamin Bowles's A Short History of the American Negro (1891), and W.E.B. Du Bois's, The Negro (1925). The revisionist writings of Williams and these other historians served these important purposes: a corrective function that countered racist histrionic and sentimental representations. Questioning much of what whites were told while others were neglected, he wrote, "Look back and you will see, drawing in and out of the books of history... all manner of queer geniuses, worth-like personalities that have left behind them sometimes a fragment of the heat..." He encouraged writers and scholars to look back into the context of history for relevance to the present and future, and he hoped to persuade them to examine "ten- dencies," rather than masterpieces or greatness for the "best promise of a national culture." During the 1930s the American mural painters in general and African American artists in particular sought to create a new kind of history painting con- ceived with creating such a useable past. These artists looked to the Harlem Renaissance, emphasizing local and regional nar- ratives, focusing on lesser-known men and women who had contributed to their communities, depicting the Democratic men," and examining the recent past to highlight the diver- sity and uniqueness of the American experience.

One of the core premises of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s was the notion of reclaiming and reinventing the past to suit the new condition of blacks in the early twentieth century. The architects of the Harlem Renaissance advocated turning to black history, developing a racial art rooted in African art and celebrating a distinctively African American contemporary identity located in the urban experience. Writers and artists embraced these ideals in their work and con- tinued to elaborate upon and revise them into the 1930s. As historian Alton Johnson has pointed out, Depression-era writers, as well as artists, sought "for a usable past" in the New Deal past, for a tradition that could provide guidance and justification for present programs and projects, studying the past to shape the future. The government-sponsored cultural projects of the 1930s represented a national rededication of the American past that was the only certainty and for a usable national history comprises several characteristics, including their conviction of the utility of the American past, their emphasis on the exceptionality of American ideas and values, their promotion of American democratic tendencies, and their sense of community and egalitarian spirits. These qualities are present in the mural paintings of the Depression artists and highlighted in the works of African American artists, a way they foregrounded the exceptional character of black history in the face of oppression, racism, and segregation.
American artists focused on history, narrativity, and didactic content in order to convey the meaning of these histories to the publics that encountered them. These three components, or "constitutive structures of meaning," shape and define history painting and together explain what history painting is and why American artists engaged large-scale mural painting with historical content during the Depression era. Historiography relates to the concept of placing the subject matter of history painting in "subjective reality," mediated by "visible" written histories. Artists sought historical or psychological meanings of or moments. The nineteenth-century history painter typically emphasized larger historical meaning rather than strict accuracy. In Depression-era mural painting, artists used the recent past as an indicator of the resilience of the American nation in the present and the future. Connected to historiography is the second component of history painting, narrativity. Artists employed historical narrative to give shape and coherence to a sequence of historical events related to a specific place and time. These events often told a story with a beginning and end, indicated the passage of time, and usually suggested consequence and a sense of causality. The third element of history painting is didactic intent—the will to teach and show history conveyed through narrative. As Barshinger notes, "Didactic intention assumes that there is a moral center, a tortuous aim, and exemplary or principle to teach." The Depression-era mural painters employed these three interrelated components at the same time that they redefined classical history painting. These artists often selected for their mural content that promoted a common heritage and social values rather than individual experiences. Significant historical events. They depicted a range of subjective matters: men working in the mine, construction, shipping, oil refinement, steel, automobile, and railroad industries symbolizing the power of commerce and progress for men and women—growing and planting the American boid, signifying its abundance and fertility, the family engaging in day-to-day activities, suggesting American solidarity and early settlers opening the "frontier" indicating a progressive and prosperous past that had particular relevance for the present. African American artists of the 1930s championed this return to history painting, employing the elements of historiography, narrativity, and didactic intent to reveal the rich and complex history of black life in the United States. For black artists, mural painting became the visual means to define the parameters of black history, to reframe African American histories, to record important moments as black history, to show the struggle for freedom, and to celebrate the ways in which African Americans had built themselves a vibrant and vital place in the post-slavery world. These artists also saw mural painting in a way to educate their own communities about the deep history of African Americans in the United States.

MURAL PAINTING IN THE UNITED STATES

Mural painting flourished during the American Renaissance period (1845-1877) as a visual form that celebrated the lofty ideals of the past and promoted the classical traditions of ancient Greece and Rome. In the minds of the artists and architects of the period, the classical tradition revealed the continuity between the ancient past and the present. Artists of the period connected mural painting to "universal values in art and architecture," which served as symbols of a renewed faith, Justice, Art, History, and so forth. Mural painting became an integral and important aspect of civic architectural projects, including the placement of murals in state capitols, public libraries, courthouses, churches, museums, and government buildings; all in the private homes of the wealthy men and women of the period. During the American Renaissance, mural painter Ethel Howard Bishfield and Kennon Cox returned to the themes of history painting, using the style of academic classicism to focus on a grand narrative of history and to create murals with idealized subject matter, "timeless truths," and "universal values." Artists of the American Renaissance believed that a unity of tradition and approach, appropriating the symbols and iconography of the classical past, would assist the development of a national American art and identity.

In a series of lectures delivered at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1921, Bishfield persuasively argued for the importance of mural painting as a building design, both as a decoration and as a reminder of the significance of the past. He believed that the purpose of murals was to commerorate the past and tell the story of the nation, to celebrate patriotism, and to recollect murals. Bishfield argued for historicity, narrativity, and didactic content as essential ingredients of mural painting, but based on universal themes and the broad traditions of history. "A public decoration is sure to be in part, at any rate, a commemoration in the public building, the community celebrates itself and is reminded of something it wants, and meaning of the highest," Bishfield concluded, "Whensoever the decorator may go up, and down these United States, he would find something to commemorate. We have to celebrate the cosmos of a continent by the plough ... We can tap upon our walls of invention, achievement, growth of our kind and kindred." Bishfield painted numerous public murals between 1895 and World War I. His mural for the Library of Congress
and America, as science. The idealized, classical figures, some in contemporary dress with modern instruments, are placed against a mosaic-like wall. All the figures are fair-skinned and rosy-cheeked. Each wears wings, uniting the composition and elevating the figures from historical to symbolic. Blackfield suggests that America, the whole and final figure in this cycle, is the inheritor of the learning of the West and represents the culmination of Western civilization. His mural on the dome carries highlights notions of progress, evolution, and achievement in culture as well as the idea of universality, all of which are at the heart of American Renaissance art.

Significant change occurred in the art world in the early twentieth century. Younger artists resisted the academic tradition of the American Renaissance and its idea that art must elevate and social uplift to viewers, create continuity with the classical past, and suggest order and harmony in their own social environments. They explored a new America through modernist form, content, and themes that seemed more relevant to them. Artists of the 1930s, who were employed through government-sponsored projects, were turned to the subject matter of modern America and moved away from the picturesque figures of the classical tradition of the American Renaissance. They employed figurative, both realistic and abstract, to depict modern bodies, and they embraced themes related to present-day America. The era of the Greeks and Romans held no allure for artists of the 1930s, who were dealing with the reality of a country suffering from a severe economic crisis and social upheaval. These artists did, however, carry forward an important idea from the mural painters of the American Renaissance period: an interest in creating a national mural art.

Thomas Hart Benton was one of the most vocal proponents of such an art based on the American scene and rooted in regional experience, particularly that of the Mid- west. Benton took up mural painting after experimenting with abstract forms and color theory. His first mural attempt, American Historical Epic (1921–1923), traced American discovery, settlement, and colonization. Benton would address these themes repeatedly in the decades that followed, concentrating on regional and local content. Early in his career, he argued for the significance of painting American history rooted in everyday experience, in "living words from people, not books," rather than on the intangible past of Greece, Rome, or the India of the 1920s. Benton's career was launched when he received the commission to paint a series of murals for the New School of Social Research in New York. This assignment, America Today (Fig. 4), allowed Benton to engage his interest in the language of modernism combined with narrative, to employ a multiscopic perspective from within the same frame, and an idea to derive from studying the dedicated space of an athletic Coburn, to unite bright and contrasting colors based on his experiments with Synchromism, to focus his interest on the United States's social and political evolution through industry and, above all, to celebrate the people in the present, not the far past—labouring and harmonizing the land for its resources and city-dwellers engaged in a vibrant and gritty urban environment.

Unlike Blackfield, two decades earlier, Benton painted diverse races in his mural, including African Americans, though they were often caricatured. America Today was a social history of the 1930s that attempted to be inclusive, an essay on modern American society. These artists did, however, carry forward an important idea from the mural painters of the American Renaissance period: an interest in creating a national mural art.
based in social realism and political activism. These three artists succeeded, Lawrence Halprin retains, in "integrating monumental painting infused with sociopolitical commentary with its architectural environment." Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros believed in a public art of social commitment that would bring the artist into contact with society, allow him to confront daily life in the art, and encourage him to use art as a weapon. American artists saw in Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros the potential for art to effect social change and a model of cultural democracy and communal national experience. They were also attracted to Mexico as an idealized, picturesque place, pre-modern and rural. They believed that Mexican art was more faithfully rooted in indigenous tradition and communities of exchange than in the individualism and competition reflected in the political and social structure of the United States. African American artists of the Depression era found in Orozco and Rivera, specifically, a new way of thinking about history, democracy, and cultural renaissance.

Arriving in the United States in 1923, Orozco spent three years painting in New York City. In 1927, he completed his first mural series for Pomona College in Claremont, California, based on the theme of Prometheus, "the creative rebel who heroically sacrificed himself for the good of man." Like Henry Hart Benton, Orozco painted a series of murals for the New School of Social Research. His frescoes explained the concept of revolution and universal brotherhood (Fig. 5). In these murals, Orozco created "an allegory of ideal human social order." He painted three longitudinal panels that presented the creative abilities of man through science, labor, and art; the table of brotherhood, occupied by men of various races; and the homoecoming of the worker, embraced by his wife while his children look on. Flashing these large images, Orozco included four panels illustrating the radical political means to achieve such ideals; his image of Gandhi, for example, celebrates the Indian leader's role as liberator of the enslaved masses. In 1942, Orozco received a commission for Baker Library at Dartmouth College, focusing on the theme of American civilization and the idea of the American experience, Diamond-Richfort asserts, "as a base onto which he could map the important question of humanity's endless struggle to resolve its greatest aspirations and ideals and its simultaneous fluctuation by its innate fallibility." Orozco's murals in the United States stand out for their emphasis on Marxist ideology, their suggestion that change can occur through the overthrow of corruption, and their stress on the role of the hero and the democratic means in achieving such change.

From late 1950 until 1954, Diego Rivera spent four years in the United States and painted five murals. Before his arrival, Rivera had a well-established reputation as a radical artist. American artists already knew of his murals for the Ministry of Education in Mexico City and the National Agricultural School at Chapingo (now the Autonomous University of Chapingo), created between 1925 and 1928. These elabo-

Fig. 1. Diego Rivera (Mexican, 1886-1957), Detroit Industry, April Wall, 1932-1933, Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Michigan.
In 1954 Rivers gained notoriety in the United States for his 1953-1955 mural for Rockefeller Center in New York City. Minted for the lobby of the center, the mural had lowerwrn a precise theme by John D. Rockefeller: "Man at the Crossroads: Looking with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future"—a lofty philosophical and spiritual vision more in tune with the outlook of Balladroth than Rivera. In contrast to the Detroit mural projects, Rivers used a Marxist and anti-capitalist narrator for the murals in which "he predicated the liberation of man from the tyranny of the machine by socialist transformation of society."96 Rivers painted scenes that emphasize the corrupting influence of capitalism, contrasted with an image of modern laborers gripping the hands of a worker and of a worker and black worker. The image of Lenin was too much for Rockefeller, who requested its removal. Rivers refused. The murals were destroyed, and American artists championed Rivers' radical stance and resistance to compromising his artistic vision. Rivers' range of murals in the United States, including the Detroit and Rockefeller Center murals, shows his fixation with modern industry and capitalism in the United States as well as his astute Marxist politics. For American artists, Rivers' epic art offered the possibility for social engagement and political activism in public art. They saw the potential of murals to capture the grand narratives of recent U.S. history, its agrarian past and industrial future, all the while focusing on the lives of everyday Americans who worked in the land and labored in the factory. Rivers' bold style—his use of a geometric pattern in the wall plane; his basic palette of earth colors and black with the periodic use of red, orange, and yellow to create visual punctuation; single, bold modeling to create monumental forms; figures placed between the other to suggest overlapping and recession of the picture plane, and the seamless transition of past and present-offered American artists a road map for composition. They borrowed all these elements from Rivers, as well as his use of a compositional frame that allowed for sequences of two or more events in a single scene.

In early 1983, before the Rockefeller Center debacle, the artist George Baldi wrote to his former classroom president Roselle J. Rosenthal about the importance of the Mexican murals as an example for a new generation and for making art accessible to the public. The roadway section of the WPA, the Federal Arts Project employed thousands of visual artists across the country. Through the support of the federal programs outlined above and, later, through the patronage of historically black colleges and universities, Audrey Douglas, Charles Alston, Charles White, and Hale Woodruff created black social history in public African-American artists turned to the Mexican murals because the art of Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros was in line with their own progressive philosophies. They believed that art could not be separated from its social and political context and must reflect the conditions of both the dominant culture and the freed man. Most importantly, the Mexican muralists' expressed and encouraged communal innovation toward the shared goals of fighting oppression and celebrating their cultural heritage. This fully integrated political program underlying the Mexican mural work became a model for African-American artists. 94 African American artists of the Depression era also found that these three Mexican artists made a "contemporary ideological case for the mural as a public art medium," witness Stewart L. Morgan, and executed works that "dramatized the heritage and contributions of ethnic minority cultures within the larger nations of Mexico and the United States," providing a "particular strategy for making these "objectives" through the use of historical allegory as a way to address the problems of the modern world. 95

Audrey Douglas was the first black painter of his generation to take up mural painting. His work is not connected stylistically to the Mexican murals, although his alignment with their Marxist shows is evident. He believed in the radical potential of public art to compositve history and attended to the unexplored stories of those left on the margins. Douglas wrote, "Each new generation can and must look back and learn from the greatness, the weaknesses and failures of our past with the firm assurance [that] the strength and courage of the past and the insights of the past can carry us forward to the future. Our problems will continue to arrive on us new and higher levels of achievement."

In 1954, under the sponsorship of WPA, Douglas created a four-panel cycle titled Aspects of Negro Life for the 125th Street Branch of the New York Public Library, near the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. The paintings in this series offer a progressive black history rooted in public art. Douglas traces the journeys of African-Americans from life in Africa to enslavement in the United States to liberation after the Civil War and, finally, to their place in the modern city as migrants from the South. In the second panel, From Slavery through Reconstruction (Fig. 7), Douglas provides a sweeping view of black history organized into three sections and read from right to left: He begins with a depiction of African Americans' mutilation at the hands of the Emancipation Proclamation. In the middle of the horizontal canvas, Art Project, and the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project (FAP), mural painting blossomed in the 1930s and early 1940s. These government-sponsored programs used murals to decorate the walls of public schools, libraries, post offices, and other government buildings to educate the American public and to create a national art form. From 1933 to 1934, the short-lived WPA, part of the Civil Works Administration, employed artists to create visual paintings and murals for public buildings. The Treasury's Section on Fine Arts is best known for placing murals in at least one post office in each state. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was the largest of the New Deal cultural programs established in 1935 to provide employment relief for thousands of artists and laborers for numerous public projects. One of five major divisions under the WPA, the Federal Arts Project employed thousands of visual artists across the country.
On the left, Douglas renders the departure of the Union soldiers from the South at the end of Reconstruction and the aftermath of the Ku Klux Klan, shown on horses, dressed in their uniforms of white conical hats and white robes, and carrying clubs. In this series Douglas both celebrates the complexity of the African American experience in the United States and expresses the hardship and sorrow that he believed were always present, lurking at the periphery of African American success.59

In 1992 Charles Alston recalled visiting Riveria at Rockville Center and the influence of the Mexican muralists and social realism on his work and on artists of the period:

"They were big influences. I mean, Orozco and Riveria were tremendous influences on all artists, black and white, in this country. . . . We were all involved because we were involved in other ways with the social realities of the '30s. Because many of us, if not most of us, as a matter of fact, were on one or other of the Art Projects. I happened to be on the mural project in two particularly areas of the District and the Riveria. As a matter of fact, I used to go down to Radio City when Riveria was painting the one they destroyed. And between his broken English and my broken French, we managed to communicate. And I was very much influenced by his mural work. And a great number of the painters on the projects in New York, most of us were members of the Artists Union, which was an organization I suppose would now be considered the left-wing organization of its day. But it dealt with the problems of the artists and kept the Federal Projects on its toes about providing for the artists and raising the right price for what we did. You couldn't escape the social implications of painting then. I think most of us went through that stage where we did an amount of social realism."

In 1956, under the WPA/FAP, Alston had been the first African American artist to supervise a New Deal mural project. He painted a two-part mural, Magic in Medicine and Modern Medicine, for the Harlem Hospital Center (Fig. 6). Installed on opposite walls facing each other in the Women's Pavilion, the first panel illustrates the origins of traditional African medicine and the second panel depicts progressive and modern medicine as practiced at Harlem Hospital by specific black men and women.60 Alston deployed extensive historical research in this dispute, turning to books on traditional African culture and Western medicine. He planned murals that were socially relevant to the community, located African American medicine in a significant past, and recognized the achievements of contemporary doctors and nurses.
The FAP approved White's sketches for the project, but the hospital superintendent, Leonard T. Dem chers, protested its content as well as the work of those other black artists on the project, including designs by Yeris Haye, Sara Mann, and Georgenna Sadeboro. As reported in Art Front in April 1946, Dem cher's objections to the murals because the four works contained "too much Negro subject matter; Negroes may not form the greater part of the community twenty-five years hence; the Negroes in the community would object to the Negro subject matter in the murals, and that the hospital is not a Negro institution and should not be singled out for treatment with Negro subject matter." The artists organized through the Artists' Union and the Harlem Artists' Guild to protest the exclusion of their works. Eventually the hospital backed down and Alston and the three other artists were allowed to complete their original designs. The conflict over the Harlem Hospital murals, however, had revealed a deep divide between the role of public art and its content, particularly for African American artists, and the politics of race at the hospital.

Charles White produced three significant murals between 1939 and 1943. In 1939-1940, he painted Progress of the American Negro for the George Cleveland Hall branch of the Chicago Public Library under the WPA (FAP) in 1940. History of the Negro Press for the American Negro Exposition in Chicago, and in 1945, his most complex mural, The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy, for Hampton University in Virginia. In Progress of the American Negro (Fig. 9), White focuses on five significant African American heroes: the former slave and women's rights advocate Sojourner Truth, the educator and politician Booker T. Washington, the abolitionist and statesman Frederick Douglass, the contralto Marian Anderson, and the agricultural scientist George Washington Carver. He chose the subjects based on a survey distributed by the Chicago Defender, a radical and influential black weekly newspaper. African American readers were asked to select black leaders they believed had contributed the most to black social progress. White believed in the political power of mural painting and wanted to emphasize the role of African Americans in the shaping of their own history. As a history painter, White depicted men and women who resisted white oppression and through their creative labors shaped the development of the United States.

Revisiting History: A Usable Past, and the Talladega College Murals

Hale Woodruff's six mural paintings for the Sewery Library at Talladega College emboldened the quest of African Americans during the Depression era to revise the American past, to recover and document black history in public space, and to educate a young generation of African Americans about their history. With experience under the Public Works of Art Project in 1935 and 1936, as well as a trip to Mexico in the summer of 1936 to study fresco painting with Diego Rivera, Woodruff called attention to African Americans' active participation in their own liberation in the three epic panels of the Amistad murals. He celebrated the valiance and commitment of blacks in creating their own educational institution in the three murals celebrating the founding of Talladega College. Woodruff wanted to heed Schoendorf's call for African Americans to 'dig up' their past in order to tell and paint a revisionist history that focused on their resistance to slavery and their accomplishments in the post-slavery world. His Amistad murals celebrated the centennial year of the Amista d revolt in large panels that depicted an uprising among a Spanish slave ship in 1839, the trial of the Africans who had mutinied in 1840, and their return to Africa in 1841 after a prolonged legal battle. Woodruff traveled to New Haven, Connecticut, to conduct research at the Yale University Library and in the archives of the New Haven Historical Society. He learned the story of the Amistad and gave historical accuracy to his murals. Woodruff's extensive research for the project indicates his strong interest in history, historical narrative, and didactic content.

The artist believed in the medium's ability to provide instruction. He wrote, "Most murals deal with subject matter which is generally known to the public that sees it...It is chiefly narrative...It can be inspirational....It can be teaching." In the Talladega murals, Woodruff included scenes of the Underground Railroad, the building of Sewery Library, and an opening day at Talladega College. His use of form, space, and color in both series indicates his tie to the mural arts of Diego Rivera. Using sculptural effects in his forms and density in his compositions, the clustering of figures along directional lines, and the panoramic gestures in brilliant color, Woodruff turned to a usable past in the mural series, finding a continuum between the radical actions of the past and the struggle for equality in the present. The six murals suggest causality: through strength, intellect, dignity, and courage, Woodruff reveals how African Americans were able to resist slavery and start anew. In these murals, he roots African American history in the collective struggle for freedom and black institution-building. He offered the past to a successive generation of Talladega College students as an example of radical engagement and a model for change in the present and the future.